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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001142

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREF PREL BG PK

SUBJECT: ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN: URDU SPEAKERS FACE
CONTINUED CHALLENGES DESPITE COURT DECISION GRANTING
CITIZENSHIP

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Nicholas Dean. Reasons: 1.4 (b)
and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The "Bihari" or Urdu-speaking population of Bangladesh continues to remain economically and socially disadvantaged despite a May 2008 Supreme Court ruling granting them citizenship, according to community leaders. During a meeting with the Ambassador, Bihari community members voiced concern that although legal barriers to citizenship no longer remain, the population faced new challenges in "entering the mainstream of Bangladeshi life." They added that the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) had yet to make a concerted effort to improve their situation. The Ambassador encouraged the community to integrate into society by learning Bengali, to continue to participate in the political process and to look within itself to find solutions to its problems rather than relying on government action. End Summary.

A Population in Limbo

¶2. (SBU) The "Bihari" community of Bangladesh is comprised of Urdu-speaking Muslims from the Indian states of Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh who migrated to East Pakistan during partition in 1947. Many of the Urdu speakers subsequently opposed the linguistic nationalist movements of the early 1950s and fought with the Pakistan army during Bangladesh's war of liberation in 1971. After independence, the population was forced to take refuge in 66 makeshift camps throughout the country. Over 200,000 sought and were granted the right to be "repatriated" to Pakistan while the rest stayed in Bangladesh and continued to be treated as stateless persons.

¶3. (SBU) There are currently 160,000-200,000 Urdu speakers living throughout the country. In September 2007, the Election Commission announced that it would permit all those who were born in the country after 1971 and were 18 or older to register to vote. Following this decision and the 2008 High Court verdict clearing the way for all Urdu speakers to claim citizenship, approximately 80 percent of all adult Biharis obtained national voter identification cards and registered to vote according to UNHCR. There was a small minority of the community which refused to obtain identification cards out of fear that it would affect their chances of repatriation to Pakistan. Voter identification cards have provided access to a whole host of other government services and effectively normalized the community, in a legal sense. According to UNHCR and Urdu-speaking community groups, the community's rate of participation in December 2008 elections was high though exact figures are unknown. Nevertheless, the community continues to lag in

various social indicators and it has never been included in a national census owing to their statelessness. UNICEF plans to conduct a baseline study of their social and economic condition in the future.

Calling for a &Mainstreaming8 Policy

14. (C) The Executive Director of Al-Falah, a non-governmental organization dedicated to development and welfare of the Urdu-speaking community, lamented that without a GOB policy to "mainstream" the Urdu-speaking community, it would take many years for this community to "catch up" and integrate with the rest of Bangladesh. In a meeting with the Ambassador and a tour of Geneva camp, one of the main Bihari camps in Dhaka, he noted that education and skills development were the community's main needs. Other leaders within Al-Falah complained that the concerns of the Urdu speaking minority were not incorporated into the country's recent poverty reduction strategy paper and that the rights of linguistic minorities were not specifically mentioned in the constitution.

15. (C) Several community leaders stated that in many instances, information about the court verdict had not yet reached all Departments of the government. They noted, for example, that several passport applications were rejected by the GOB passport authority because applicants had used a camp address on the forms and some officials were not aware that Urdu speakers were eligible for citizenship. Community leaders expressed a strong desire for quotas in schools and civil service jobs. The Ambassador lauded the court decision

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as a big step forward and he agreed that the community still faces challenges.

Drawing comparisons to debates over bilingualism in the U.S., he urged the community to focus on education and try to assimilate into Bangladeshi society, by learning Bengali while preserving their own identity. The Ambassador also encouraged the community to exercise their political rights and lobby their local representative to act on their behalf. He commented that the community, though relatively small, could do much through the democratic political process.

Steps towards Integration

16. (C) The Executive Director stressed that the vast majority of Urdu speakers wanted to learn Bengali and be fully integrated into Bangladesh. He noted that most families who had wanted to go to Pakistan had already left and the existing population, especially the younger generation, was more concerned with building a life in Bangladesh and securing their rights as citizens. He added that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina promised to work towards "rehabilitating" the community but he acknowledged that the government was new and it faced a number of other challenges. Members of the community noted that the Biharis had full freedom of movement for example, citing the statistic that about 60 percent of individuals residing in one of the main camps in Dhaka were currently working outside the camp.

Comment

17. (C) The Government of Bangladesh took a major step towards integrating Urdu speakers with the 2008 Supreme Court decision granting citizenship to all members of the Urdu speaking community. Judging from the high turnout of Urdu speakers in the 2008 election, the community is eager to engage in the political process. Even under an Awami League government, there does not appear to be any significant backlash against a community that was once regarded as "collaborators" during the 1971 war. Socially and economically, however, the Biharis still have a way to go.

Given the widespread poverty and unemployment in Bangladesh, the government is unlikely to offer special treatment for the Urdu speaking community. Indeed there seems to be little to differentiate the community from other disadvantaged populations in Bangladesh. Post will continue to urge the community to exercise their rights and work towards integration into mainstream society.

Dean